

The Paradox of Taste to the Experimental Test

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ABSTRACT: *In a series of recent experimental philosophy articles, Florian Cova and colleagues have cast doubt on the existence of a traditional tension that aestheticians since Hume and Kant have noted in our aesthetic judgements and practices, viz. the paradox of taste. We argue that Cova et al. misrepresent the way in which the aesthetics tradition has conceived the paradox of taste, and question the relevance of their experiments for the existence of the paradox of taste as traditionally understood in aesthetics.*

A fundamental question in aesthetics is whether aesthetic judgments are subjective or not.¹ One of the major pieces of evidence to answer that question has traditionally been taken to be what the majority of people say and do concerning aesthetic matters. In particular, one major tension has been noticed: on the one hand, taste seems proverbially described as something subjectively valid (*de gustibus non disputandum est, chacun à son goût, sobre gustos no hay nada escrito...*) and, on the other hand, people seem to treat taste judgements as if they were not merely subjective; in particular, they engage in disputes, defer to experts or discard certain views as absurd.

Statements of this tension can be found at least since Hume and Kant. Thus, In “Of the Standard of Taste”, Hume famously formulates the tension thus:

[T]he proverb has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes. [...] But though this axiom, by passing into a proverb, seems to have attained the sanction of common sense; there is certainly a species of common sense which opposes it [...]

¹ Zangwill (2001) even calls this “the Big Question of aesthetics”.

Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON, or BUNYAN and ADDISON, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as TENERIFFE (Hume 1757/1777, Mil 230–231).

Similarly, Kant contrasts two commonplaces of taste:

As regards the Pleasant every one is content that his judgement [...] should be limited merely to his own person. [However,] if he gives out anything as beautiful, he supposes in others the same satisfaction—he judges not merely for himself, but for every one, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. (Kant 1790, §7)

More recently, Crispin Sartwell (2017) writes in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on “Beauty”:

Taste is proverbially subjective: *de gustibus non est disputandum* (about taste there is no disputing). On the other hand, we do frequently dispute about matters of taste, and some persons are held up as exemplars of good taste or of tastelessness. Some people’s tastes appear vulgar or ostentatious, for example. Some people’s taste is too exquisitely refined, while that of others is crude, naive, or non-existent. Taste, that is, appears to be both subjective and objective.

This tension which, following Korsmeyer (1990/2019) among others,² we will call ‘the paradox of taste’, has been taken to be evidence for, as well as a spur to the fundamental question about the nature of aesthetic judgments, since an answer to it is taken to be by no means obvious. Aesthetics has so far debated at length what explanation to give of the tension, and whether and how it supports an answer to the fundamental question. But the existence of the tension itself has often been taken for granted.

Recently, however, Cova et al. (2019), building up on Cova and Pain’s (2012) results,

² Other names for the same tension exist. Sartwell (2017) for instance calls it “the antinomy of taste”, following Kant’s name for his own formulation of the tension.

have questioned the existence of this tension by means of a series of experiments. Their results show that a vast majority of people, across different cultures, endorse claims that support aesthetic subjectivism. In their view, this demonstrates that “the traditional way of approaching the debate over the nature of aesthetic judgement is fundamentally misguided” (335) and that “philosophical inquiries about the nature of aesthetic judgments should no longer take the (explicit) belief in intersubjective validity (and how to explain it) as a starting point” (337). In this paper, however, we present some reasons to be sceptical of Cova et al.’s conclusion.

In §1 we will argue that Cova et al. misrepresent the way in which the aesthetics tradition has conceived the paradox of taste. In §2 we show that the paradox can be conceptualized along three distinct axes. In §3, we argue that Cova et al.’s tests do not provide relevant evidence under any of those three conceptualizations of the tension. In §4, we consider a fourth conceptualization of the tension that might be seen as more favourable to Cova et al.’s tests. In §5 we discuss a more recent article co-authored by Cova which presents new evidence apparently in tension with Cova’s earlier contributions. We show that even this latter case fails to do justice to the aesthetics tradition or to provide evidence that calls it into question.

1. The Tradition

In large part, the aesthetics literature on the paradox of taste has not taken explicit beliefs in intersubjective validity as the main evidence for the existence of the paradox of taste. Indeed, the texts that Cova et al. themselves cite to support their interpretation of the aesthetics debate do not show that aestheticians give much weight to folk’s explicit belief in intersubjective validity. As a matter of fact, even some of the texts Cova et al. cite say something different.

For example, Cova et al. (2019) cite the following passage from a prominent recent aesthetician:

Both realism and non-realism are on a par as far as the experiential aspect of aesthetics is concerned. But when it comes to explaining the normativity of aesthetic judgements, the realist is ahead [...] I conclude that folk aesthetics is thus realist. Whether or not the *tacit folk metaphysical commitment* to aesthetic facts or states of affair is justified is another matter,

but *our aesthetic judgments presuppose* that metaphysics. What is not an option is holding some non-realist view, be it Humean, Kantian or dispositional, while we can unproblematically retain *our ordinary practice* of making aesthetic judgments (Zangwill 2001; cit. in Cova, 321–22; our emphases).

Here Zangwill is pointing out an advantage of realism, and hence intersubjectivism about aesthetic judgements. His starting point is the folk's "ordinary practice of making aesthetic judgements". This folk practice, he suggests, is committed to the existence of aesthetic facts, and hence is unproblematically in accord with realism. However, as he clearly points out, such a folk commitment is "tacit". That, he claims, is the metaphysics that "our aesthetic judgements presuppose".³

Next, Cova et al. (2019) quote Noël Carroll as saying:

The supposition that aesthetic properties are objective also explains better how we talk about them than does the projection theory. For example, people involved in disputes about aesthetic properties act *as though* they think that they are disagreeing about the real properties of objects. They behave *as though* they think that there is a fact of the matter to be determined. They speak *as if* one side of the disagreement is right and the other wrong. (Carroll 1999; cit. in Cova et al. 2019, 322; our emphases)

Like Zangwill, Carroll does not take "the (explicit) belief in intersubjective validity" as a starting point. He starts from the consideration that, in talking about aesthetic properties, people "act" in certain ways: e.g. they get involved in disputes. From this fact he draws the conclusion that they "must believe that aesthetic properties are objective". This, however, is the conclusion of an argument to the best explanation, rather than one of its premises. The important premise of such an argument is that people engage in a certain kind of "behaviour".

Cova and Pain (2012) also argue that aestheticians should not have assumed that the folk are intersubjectivists. Indeed, they use some of the same quotations including Zangwill's and Carroll's just quoted. They also quote the following from another contemporary aesthetician:

³ In later papers, Zangwill (2018) and (2021) puts forward similar concerns about Cova and Pain's (2012) experiments.

[Aesthetic Realism]’s views belong to folk metaphysics: there is no attempt to set a new ontological partition, purportedly clearer, more accurate, or more convenient, for our way to conceptualize reality; rather, it is an attempt to explain the implicit ontology in our ordinary aesthetic ascriptions and our most common aesthetic practice. (Réhault 2009; cit. in Cova and Pain 2012, 260)

Once more, Réhault here is not claiming that the folk hold explicit beliefs in the intersubjective validity of aesthetics judgements, but that folk behaviour is “implicit[ly]” committed to intersubjectivism. As these three examples illustrate, the paradox of taste is not a tension between explicit beliefs in subjectivism and explicit beliefs in intersubjectivism.

2. Three Distinct Axes

Before examining Cova et al.’s experiments in more detail, it is worth noting that the quotes previously cited from Zangwill, Carroll and Réhault exemplify another recurrent feature in the traditional understanding of the paradox of taste, i.e. the alignment between explicitness and beliefs, on the one hand, and implicitness and behaviours on the other. In other words, the aesthetics tradition observes the subjectivist viewpoint mainly in explicitly avowed beliefs. By contrast, the objectivist or intersubjectivist viewpoint is mainly seen as residing more implicitly in *patterns of behaviour*.⁴ Consider for instance this recent characterization of the paradox of taste:

Two common observations about aesthetics are in tension: that people generally consider aesthetic judgments subjective, and that people generally behave like objectivists (arguing over judgments, making choices based on judgments of trusted critics, rejecting strong assertions of aesthetic equivalence). (Rabb et al. 2020, 1)

⁴ In later passages, both Cova and Pain (2012) and Cova et al. (2019) briefly mention the tension between beliefs and behaviour as a possible alternative to the paradox of taste. What they do not acknowledge is that this tension is in fact the paradox of taste itself as it has been understood by the aesthetics tradition.

These two conceptualizations of the paradox of taste—along belief/behaviour and explicit/implicit axes—are clearly connected. But they are nevertheless different, and it is best to distinguish them, for the appeal to implicit beliefs is an attempt to *explain* the way in which people behave, what they say when they interact with others or when they disagree with others’ aesthetic judgments. Thus, Carroll concludes his (previously mentioned) description of folks’ aesthetic behaviour as follows:

So, they, at least, must believe that aesthetic properties are objective. That is the way of understanding their behaviour that renders it most intelligible. On the other hand, if disputants are simply trading projections, we would have to say that their behaviour is ultimately irrational. (Carroll 1999, 117; our emphases)

Finally, it is important to note that the paradox of taste can also be conceived as a contrast between people’s aesthetic judgements/practices and people’s judgments/practices when they reflect *about* situations in which disagreements concerning aesthetic judgments or practices are at stake. When reflecting about aesthetic discussion and disagreements, people often wax subjectivist (or so the tradition in aesthetics assumes), endorsing the proverbial “de gustibus non disputandum est” or “to each their own”. Such judgments are *about* aesthetic judgments and *about* aesthetic disputes; they are, in an important sense, *meta-aesthetic* and sometimes their subjectivist tone may contrast with the things that people do and say when they are immersed in the situations in which they engage in arguments as to, say, whether something is or is not beautiful. But this may be the case even at the level of fully explicit beliefs.

3. The Experiments

Building up on the model set by Cova and Pain (2012), Cova et al. set out to test 2,392 participants in nineteen countries across four continents. The participants were invited to describe something that they find very beautiful and imagine someone disagreeing with them. Then, they were asked to choose one among the following three options, specifying how certain they are of their responses:

1. One of you is correct while the other is not.
2. Both of you are correct.
3. Neither is correct. It makes no sense to talk about correctness in this situation. (Cova et al., 2019, 324)

Their results show that an underwhelming number of people (7%) answer 1. Since the endorsement of the subjectivity of aesthetic judgments is very robust, Cova et al. conclude that the traditionally postulated paradox of taste does not exist.

Cova et al. ask participants to choose among competing explicit beliefs (or avowals of belief) *about* aesthetic judgments (whether two people who disagree in their aesthetic assessment can both be right, whether one of them has to be wrong or whether it makes no sense to adjudicate in these matters). By contrast, as earlier indicated, the issue, as it has been traditionally understood in aesthetics, does not concern a tension between folk's explicit endorsement of dicta such as *de gustibus non disputandum est* and their explicit beliefs in intersubjectivism. The problem that aestheticians consider most puzzling, instead, is that people declare to agree with a statement, and then they go on to do and say things that are not in line with what they explicitly endorsed. Cova et al.'s experiments do, at most, confirm what aestheticians already knew: that people explicitly endorse the claim of subjectivism.

So, Cova et al.'s tests are not sufficient to show that the paradox of taste, as traditionally understood in aesthetics, does not exist. In general, one cannot infer from someone's explicit avowals that they will behave according to them. For example, it is well established that many people endorse explicitly non-racist beliefs, and yet they behave as if they believed the opposite by, e.g., not taking into further consideration the CVs of candidates with 'black-sounding' names (such as 'Jamal' or 'Lakisha'), even when they have the same qualifications as candidates with 'white-sounding' names such as 'Emily' or 'Greg'.⁵ If Cova et al. (2019)'s strategy was applied to this case, we would have to conclude that such people were not racist. But that would be absurd.

⁵ See Bertrand & Mullainathan (2004) and Kelly & Roedder (2008), "Racial Recognition and the Ethics of Implicit Bias", *Philosophy Compass* 3, 522–544. For these and other cases of "fragmented mind", see Borgoni et al. (2021).

To sum up, if one conceptualizes the paradox of taste along the belief/behaviour axis, showing that the tension suggested by the paradox does not exist would require showing that the folk *behave* in a subjectivist way. However, Cova et al.’s experiments primarily test the folks’ beliefs rather than their behaviours. If one instead conceptualizes the paradox along the explicit/implicit axis, showing that the tension does not exist would require showing that the folk hold *implicit* subjectivist beliefs. But the experiments under discussion primarily test folks’ explicit beliefs. Finally, if the paradox is conceptualized along the meta-aesthetic/aesthetic axis, showing that the tension does not exist would require showing that the folk make *aesthetic* statements in a subjectivist fashion. However, Cova et al.’s experiments primarily test folks’ meta-aesthetic avowals, rather than their first-order aesthetic judgements.

We are left with the conclusion that Cova et al. (2019)’s tests do not show that the tension, as traditionally understood in aesthetics, does not exist. Neither do they show that there is anything radically wrong, in this respect, with the traditional aesthetics approach. In what follows, however, we consider a fourth possible axis along which the paradox of taste might be understood.

4. A Fourth Axis

As we have pointed out, the paradox of taste has its roots in Hume’s description of what he considers as a tension in “common sense”. However, Hume’s original formulation of the paradox of taste can be interpreted in various different ways. One of these may be sufficiently friendly to Cova et al.’s understanding of the problem to be used to resist our arguments against them so far. On this rather literal interpretation, the relevant tension is between the subjectivist belief that it is “fruitless to dispute concerning taste” and the intersubjectivist belief that “[w]hoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON, or BUNYAN and ADDISON, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a molehill to be as high as TENERIFFE”. The subjectivist belief is meant to apply *generally* to all cases (as in the proverb), whilst intersubjectivist beliefs apply only insofar as we consider *particular* cases (such as the works of particular poets).⁶

⁶This understanding may be traced back to suggestions contained in Korsmeyer (1990/2019), 98.

If one understands the paradox of taste in the way just suggested, then one may see it as a conflict between explicit beliefs. From this perspective, one might be tempted to conclude that Cova et al.'s experiments challenge Hume's claim that the folk hold intersubjectivist beliefs about particular cases, and hence the existence of a paradox. For example, if a participant in Cova et al. (2019)'s experiment describes a poem by Milton that she finds very beautiful, and imagines someone else stating that Ogilby is a better poet than Milton, then Hume's prediction seems to be that that participant will conclude that the other person is wrong. By contrast, the experiment shows that she will not reach that conclusion (i.e. she will not choose Cova et al. 2019's Response 1).

However, this interpretation of Hume is not obviously the correct one. As we have seen in Section 1, many aestheticians have understood Hume as focusing instead on a contrast between implicit commitments to intersubjectivism and explicit belief in subjectivism. Moreover, even if this were the correct interpretation, it would be an interpretation that only applies to Hume. Kant and various other subsequent aestheticians have seen the paradox of taste in a different way. As we have argued earlier, the paradox is typically understood to be mainly about the tension between *tacit* or *implicit* intersubjectivist commitments vs. *explicit* subjectivist beliefs, rather than about the tension between *explicit* intersubjectivist beliefs about particular cases vs. *explicit* subjectivist beliefs that hold in general. As a consequence, it is not fair to say, as Cova et al. do, that the tension endorsed by the aesthetics tradition does not exist.

5. A Conversion?

More recently, Cova has co-authored a new experimental article (Bonard et al. forthcoming), which might be construed as in tension with the earlier contributions discussed so far. This new paper sets out to probe folks' opinions on the distinction between good and bad taste. What the paper reports finding is that most people accept there is good and bad taste and that taste can be improved. At the same time, they are almost 50-50 split between subjectivist and objectivist understandings of what taste is.⁷ The authors of the paper conclude that, far from being a figment

⁷Similar results were reached in a recent survey of philosophers' impressions: <https://survey2020.philpeople.org>. Among other things, the results speak against a divide between folk

of aestheticians' imagination, the paradox of taste is still present today.

This conclusion is more in line with what we have been arguing. However, Bonard et al.'s argument to that conclusion still risks not doing justice to the aesthetics tradition. As we have been arguing, the conflict between subjectivist and objectivist tendencies that the aesthetics tradition typically observes is to a good approximation expressed in terms of explicit vs implicit attitudes. These are *intrapersonal* conflicting attitudes held by the same judges. At least immediately, however, Bonard et al.'s results suggest instead a mere *interpersonal* split between two different sets of participants, i.e. those who express subjectivist, and those who express objectivist, understandings of taste.⁸

This flaw in the way they interpret their results notwithstanding, Bonard et al.'s results are not incompatible with traditional observations in aesthetics. The nature of the relevant questions they ask of participants are in fact compatible with more explicit or implicit readings. Experimental participants are first asked the following question:

When we speak of people's preferences about works of art (such as novels, paintings, music, songs, movies, TV shows, etc.), we sometimes make a difference between people who have "good taste" and those who have "bad taste".

Has it ever happened to you to say or think that a certain person had better taste than another one in this sense? (YES/NO) (5)

If they answer 'yes', then they are asked the following set of additional questions:

What do you mean when you say that someone has good taste? Please, explain in a few sentences. [...]

What do you mean when you say that someone has bad taste? Please, explain in a few

and philosophical impressions on this topic.

⁸On the intrapersonal/interpersonal distinction in experimental philosophy, see Marta Campdelacreu et al. (2020).

sentences. [...]

Can you think of a person who, according to you, has good taste? Describe in a few sentences why you think this person has good taste. [...]

Can you think of a person who, according to you, has bad (or poor) taste? Describe in a few sentences why you think this person has poor taste. (6)

However, such questions, especially when asked as a set, can be interpreted in different ways depending on the emphasis each participant gives to each question, or component thereof. On the one hand, the questions ask participants to elaborate their views about taste in quite explicit and general ways. On the other hand, the questions also touch on more operational aspects of taste than the questions Cova et al. asked in earlier papers. Whereas the latter asked whether disagreement about taste was to be interpreted in an objectivist or subjectivist sense, Bonard et al.'s four questions, (a) ask participants to explain their own use of words ("What do you mean when you say"), and (b) ask them to describe examples that illustrate the distinction between good and bad taste. These latter two aspects of Bonard et al.'s questioning can be construed as ways of articulating in more explicit ways behaviours of aesthetic judgement that are more often undertaken on a more implicit level. These different aspects of Bonard et al.'s experimental setting make their questions more ambiguous between the explicit and implicit sides of the paradox of taste, than was the case with Cova et al.'s earlier experiments. This in turn can cause the split between subjectivism and objectivism in their results.

We conclude that the features of the experimental settings of the three papers discussed fall short of establishing folks' views on the validity of aesthetic judgements, as they fail to discriminate between issues that were already highlighted by the aesthetics tradition.

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